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Can we talk ticks?

BY ANNETTE PARSONS AND JIM CLOVER

How often do you think about ticks as you are out hiking trails in our beautiful Applegate Valley or elsewhere in and around southwestern Oregon? Do you believe that they are always out there, ready to jump on you from the bushes if you get within 10 feet? Or do you think they drop out of trees? Read on.

Ticks are in our woodlands, shrublands and grasslands in and around the Rogue Valley most of the time. There are different species, and different life stages of each species that favor different habitats and different times of the year (see below).

Month(s)	Species	Stage	Habitat
Oct – May	Deer (Ixodes) tick	Adult	Oak/madrone
Feb – Aug	Deer (Ixodes) tick	Immature	Leaf litter
April – Aug	Dermacenter tick	Adult	Hardwoods/brush
May – Sept	Dermacenter tick	Immature	Leaf litter/grass

Our three most common species are the deer tick (*Ixodes pacificus*), the wood tick (*Dermacenter variabilis*), and the Pacific Coast tick (*D. occidentalis*).

The best way to avoid a tick bite is to avoid the tick in the first place. Once you understand when and where the tiny creatures like to hang out, that becomes easier than you might guess.

Repeated studies in the woodlands, shrublands, and grasslands of California and Oregon have shown that:

- Adult ticks are almost always (98%) on grass and other vegetation overhanging a trail from the UPHILL side vs. the downhill side.
- Nymph and larval stage ticks are found in leaf litter, especially in our southern Oregon oak/madrone woodlands.
- Wood ticks (*Dermacenter*) can carry Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever.
- Deer ticks (*Ixodes*) can carry Lyme disease.
- Nymph stage deer ticks have a higher incidence of infection with the bacteria that causes Lyme disease than do either the larva or the adult stages.
- A tick cannot transmit a disease to you simply by crawling on you—it must bite.
- The longer a tick remains attached via its bite, the better its chances of transmitting a disease to you.

There are many misconceptions surrounding ticks and their bites, and how to deal with them if you do get bitten.

Some of the most common TICK MYTHS are:

- Ticks bury themselves in your skin.
—Ticks do NOT embed their heads in you when they bite; they insert only their barbed mouthpart. Your skin may swell up around the site.
- Ticks “drill” in when they bite.
—Tick mouthparts are like little barbed harpoons. If you twist them in ANY direction when you remove them, you increase your chance of breaking off the mouthpart, which can remain in your skin.
- You can remove a tick by putting a hot match to its rear end.
—DO NOT DO THIS! Also, do not apply oil, or fingernail polish, or anything else to try to smother the tick. Any of these can cause the tick to regurgitate its stomach contents into your blood, which can carry disease organisms from the tick to you.
- Ticks can jump from the bushes or fall out of trees onto you.
—Ticks do NOT jump or climb trees.

Some important TICK FACTS are:

Ticks DO work hard to earn their living. Their life cycle is complex:

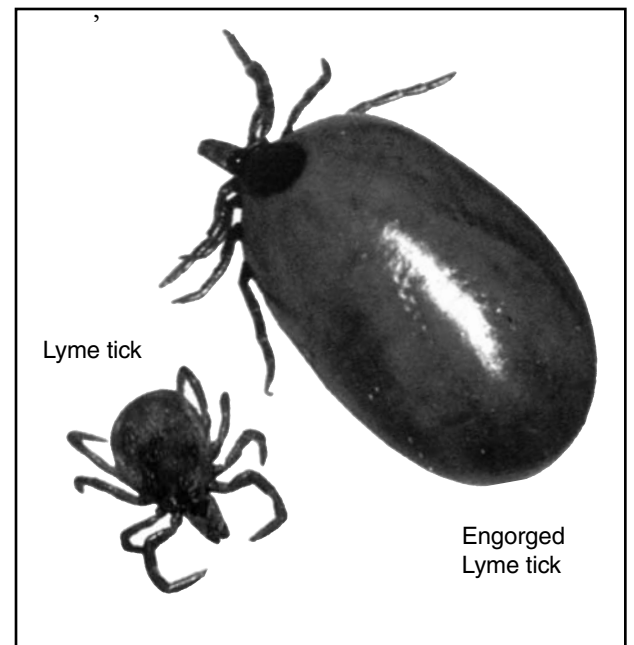
1. First the tick must find a place where a potential blood meal is likely to happen by (such as the edge of an opening or a trail).
2. Then they must climb far enough up on a piece of vegetation to be in a likely position to hitch a ride. Usually this is between about knee to waist



height, and usually on a tall blade of grass or other herbaceous vegetation hanging over the trail on the uphill side (see photo above).

3. Then they wait. If they sense a potential meal coming along, they will fling out their little legs and hope the animal (or you!) passes close enough to touch the grass so they can grab on and hitch a ride. They are patient; they can wait months for a meal to come to them.
4. Once they are ON, they walk around on their host in search of a tender spot for a meal. Favorite places on animals are behind ears or on the neck. On humans, armpits, neck, waist and groin are likely targets.
5. After they insert their mouthpart, it takes about three to five days to fill their body with blood. A tick can expand up to 50 times its normal size when it is taking in blood (see photos below).

At each stage (larva, nymph, adult) the tick must get a blood meal or it will die.



SAFE TICK REMOVAL

If you do get bitten, remove the tick as soon as possible. A tick's body is similar to a needle and syringe, the mouthpart being the needle and the body the syringe. Therefore, avoid squeezing the body with blunt instruments (like your fingers). Instead, use fine-tipped forceps and grasp the tick as close to the mouthpart as possible. Pull straight up gently but firmly until the tick and mouthparts come out. With a magnifying glass you will be able to see if the mouthpart is unbroken.

Most people will react impressively to our local tick bites with a sore red spot at the bite site that can last for days. This is a pretty typical reaction and does not mean you have Lyme disease. If you develop an angry red rash with a white area in the middle, or experience fever or flu-like symptoms, see a doctor. Blood tests for Lyme disease are available, but many doctors will choose to treat a patient with these symptoms with antibiotics immediately.

Being aware of these simple facts can help you avoid getting a tick on you in the first place, let alone getting a bite or a tick-borne disease.

Annette Parsons and Jim Clover
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Annette and Jim live in the Middle Applegate on a farm with a small vineyard, two mustangs, a mule, and three cats. Annette is a retired soil scientist, and Jim is a retired public health entomologist.